Revolutionising the research journey

Developing an online planning tool for researchers

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This article describes how Library and Learning Resources at Birmingham City University developed an online planning tool for postgraduate and doctoral researchers through the use of new software and collaboration with academics. Our aim is to demonstrate how digital developments can be used to open up access to content for researchers by providing an online planning aid with links to relevant resources.

Introduction

In 2011 a Library and Learning Resources project team developed a time-management tool designed to guide undergraduate students in the completion of their first assignment. This tool, My Assignment Planner (MAP), was based on the Assignment Survival Kit developed by Staffordshire University and immediately proved a great success. In 2013 work began to develop a similar tool to map the research journey for postgraduate and doctoral researchers. The name ResMap was chosen in order to link with the premise of MAP while also distinguishing it as a research tool.

The timing of the project was felicitous as it tied in with a fundamental reorganisation of support for research, which now had a university-wide focus rather being largely faculty-focused.

ResMap Working group

As with MAP, a project group was formed representing all strategic teams in Library and Learning Resources. However, it quickly became apparent that a small group working closely with key research academics in each faculty would be more effective.

The major benefit of this collaborative approach was that the group could draw upon the expertise and experience of active researchers in developing the content and structure of ResMap. By default, it also raised the profile of Library and Learning Resources in the university's research community.

A decision was made at an early stage not to use the same software as MAP as it was felt that the use of an online calculator may not be relevant for a research project. The group was also aware that the research process is uniquely personal and felt that guidance was more appropriate than advice about time management.

How research informed practice

An initial draft comprised the key elements of the research process: planning, research, methodology, data analysis, writing, evaluation and dissemination. This was circulated to groups of postgraduates across the university, along with a short online survey to obtain feedback.

85% of respondents stated that they would find the tool useful, 89% stated that they found the steps appropriate for their research and 89% thought that the level of the information given in the steps was appropriate. These findings helped to prioritise areas for inclusion in the tool.

The next step was to decide on the platform for the tool. Library and Learning

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Resources had recently purchased the Springshare software, Libguides, the functionality of which complemented the format of the content of ResMap. The Libguides software allowed the group to make the content more visually appealing and interactive, with features such as Twitter feeds, the Library Online Chat widget and links to the library catalogues and search engine.

Using Libguides

We started the development work with LibGuides version 1, using tabs to denote home, getting started, literature review, methodology & data, evaluation, final steps, potential pitfalls, support and latest research news. Each tab has a drop-down menu with sub-sections. The pages have a narrow column on the left for boxes with tips and additional information / links. The wider right-hand column has the main content. This structure gives the user the opportunity to work through the research process sequentially or to go straight to the relevant topic.

Other design criteria were applied, such as the use of images to break up the text, to link to quality resources already available in the university or from other organisations and to ensure that there was a consistent look and feel to the pages.

Use of images

Our draft contained images from services such as Thinkstock and Wikimedia; in the final version we replaced any image that might infringe third-party rights. Where we needed an image that was not available from convenient stock-holding services, one of the team with either created one or repurposed stock material. This proved time-consuming but ensured that images reflect the university's research.

Linking to existing material

The key difficulty here was ensuring that links would work in the future. Although a lot of relevant high-quality material is openly accessible on the web, we decided only to link to resources information was strictly relevant to our community – so several US and UK institutional sites were rejected. The problems of keeping links up to date also applied to resources available within the university. Research governance and the supporting resource are gradually being standardised to a university-wide rather than faculty-led model. For this reason we could not include the links appearing in the university's own material without first checking that they were still valid. This too was time-consuming.

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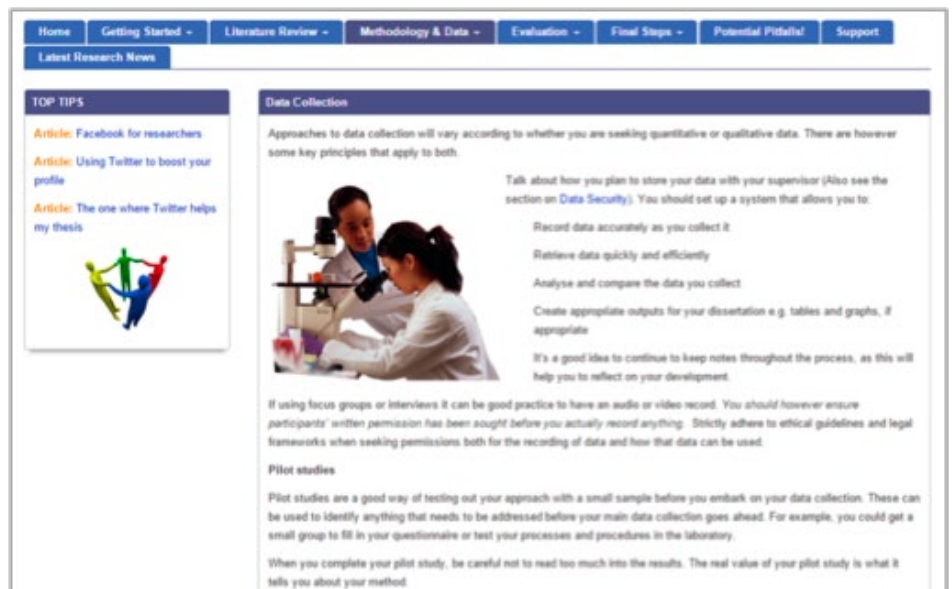
HTML or not to HTML

The use of HTML raised some issues, particularly for copying text into a page. Word and other copy functions can also copy any embedded commands – such as font size – into a new page, and subsequent attempts to fix a font using the editor does not always overwrite the embedded commands. When viewed on another terminal the unwanted coding can force changes of font and layout, so a working knowledge of HTML proved useful to clean the pages prior to publication.

Layout

We discovered, after the launch of ResMAP, that when viewed on an iPad the boxes on the left display at the top, sometimes necessitating in a lot of scrolling down before the main text appears. This will be amended when ResMAP is updated.

LibGuides 2 was released near the end of the ResMAP development period, offering much greater functionality including the use of tabs within sections. Consideration was given to re-editing ResMAP to make use of this new functionality and improve navigation, but we decided against this as it would have delayed the planned launch. We shall reconsider this before the next update of ResMAP.

Content

The content follows established generic models of the research process. The first iteration used the research interests of the Faculty of Health as a starting point, but feedback from researchers in Engineering, Music and Art showed that it was too detailed and favoured the human as research subject. Rather than seeking to provide equivalent detail for all interests, the team edited out any discipline bias and increased the range of examples of approaches and data gathering methods. We also shifted the balance toward the journey the individual researcher takes, thus placing greater emphasis on the researcher's health and well-being, the relationship with supervisors, other sources of help and support and tools such as referencing managers. The purpose of ResMAP is to provide an overview, not a detailed 'How to…', which is provided elsewhere. ResMAP, by taking a wider view, has highlighted where other library and learning resources teams can usefully develop services to meet discipline-specific needs.

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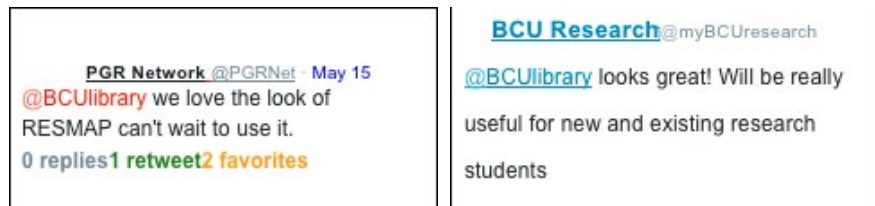## Developing an online planning tool for researchers

Reception

Since it went live in September 2014, ResMap has been showcased at the university's annual research conference Rescon14, as well as at various Faculty Research Cafés. The Learning & Teaching, Enquiry Services and Centre for Academic Success teams, which are all part of Library and Learning Resources, are also promoting it.

In the five months since the launch in September 2014, ResMap has had 2,676 visitors to the page. It has been highly commended by members of the university's research community.

'PhD is a journey surrounded with hidden uncertainties, Resmap provided a great support in terms of revealing many of these uncertainties' (Mohammad Mayouf, PhD Researcher in BIM [Building Information Modelling] and Building Performance, Birmingham City University).

PGR Network @PGRNet · May 15
@BCUlibrary we love the look of RESMAP can't wait to use it.
0 replies 1 retweet 2 favorites

BCU Research @myBCUresearch
@BCUlibrary looks great! Will be really useful for new and existing research students

Conclusion

At the end of this academic year the working group is planning a review of ResMap, again using PGRNet, to ensure the content remains relevant, up to date and easy to navigate.

The development of ResMap was the first occasion on which Library and Learning Resources had collaborated with academic staff and students to develop a support tool from scratch. Initially unsure if this approach would work, we were delighted by the level of interest and willingness to participate from Birmingham City University's research community. ResMAP is owned by the university's researchers, not by Library and Learning Resources.

ResMAP can be found at: http://libguides.bcu.ac.uk/resmap

My Assignment Planner can be found at: http://library.bcu.ac.uk/MAP2/freecalc-mail/

ASK – Assignment Survival Kit can be found at: http://www.staffs.ac.uk/ask/